

# **Sexual Harassment and Organizational Outcomes**

Charlie L. Law



DEFENSE EQUAL OPPORTUNITY MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH

Directed by Dr. Daniel P. McDonald, Director of Research  
Spring 2011

Technical Report [Executive Summary] No. 99-11

## **Executive Summary**

### **Issue**

Sexual harassment continues to be a problem in the United States Military. Indeed, Antecol & Cobb-Clark (2006) have found that 70.9 % of active-duty women reported experiencing sexually harassing behavior (e.g., crude or offensive behavior [69.2%], unwanted sexual attention [40.8%], or sexual coercion [12.3%]). Furthermore, 50 % reported hearing jokes about sex, and 25 % reported that they were repeatedly asked for dates or touched in a way that made them feel uncomfortable. Clearly, sexual harassment is a topic of concern for military commanders. A great deal of research on sexual harassment has accumulated over the past two decades. That research shows that sexual harassment leads to lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007).

### **Current Research**

In the current study, we examined the relationships between three types of sexual harassment (gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion) and organizational outcomes (job satisfaction and organizational commitment). Similar to previous research, we found that all three types of sexual harassment are negatively related to both job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Furthermore, we found that leadership cohesion partially mediated the relationship between sexual harassment and job satisfaction and between sexual harassment and organizational commitment. This indicates that while sexual harassment may lead to job dissatisfaction and decreased organizational commitment, that leader cohesion may ameliorate some of those negative effects. Additionally, like Harned, Ormerod, Palmieri, Collinsworth, & Reed (2002), we found that the organizational climate was related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment. In our study, organizational climate partially

mediated the relationships between sexual harassment and organizational outcomes. Much like our findings regarding leader cohesion, individuals who perceive a supportive organizational climate are less likely to be dissatisfied and have lowered organizational commitment. This indicates that although sexual harassment can negatively affect job satisfaction and organizational commitment, there are other organizational issues that may have a much greater effect on individual's job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The sum of these analyses indicates that while the occurrence of sexual harassment negatively affects job satisfaction and organizational commitment, that relationship is more complicated than it initially appears. Indeed, leadership cohesion and organizational climate sexual harassment both affect the relationships between sexual harassment and negative workplace outcomes.

### **Recommendations**

- First, while we do not suggest that organizations should ignore efforts to decrease sexual harassment in the workplace, the current study indicates that a supportive organizational climate for those who are sexually harassed and unified leadership may be more important. That is, organizations should make it clear that those who experience sexual harassment should feel safe in reporting the infraction and that the complaints will be taken seriously. Furthermore, organizations should ensure that leaders are all on the same page and work well together. That may be particularly important in regards to enforcing sexual harassment policies.
- Second, organizations should be aware that all types of sexual harassment have negative effects on job satisfaction and organizational commitment. In fact, the more subtle types of harassment (e.g., gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention) appear to affect job satisfaction and organizational commitment more than the overt quid pro quo type of

sexual harassment (e.g., sexual coercion). This should drive organizational efforts to create an organizational climate free from sexual harassment. While it is certainly important for organizations to emphasize the inappropriate nature of sexual coercion, it might be just as important, if not more important for organizations to emphasize the inappropriate nature of gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention.

- Finally, our results are important given the possibility that sexual harassment leads to sexual assault. While research investigating the link between sexual harassment and sexual assault is limited, Sadler, Booth, Cook, & Doebbeling (2003) found that those who experience sexual harassment are more likely to be the targets of sexual assault. Specifically, Sadler, Booth, Cook & Doebbeling found that female military members who were the recipients of unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion were more likely to be sexually assaulted. Furthermore, women with supervisors that made inappropriate sexual comments, gestures, or allowed those gestures were also more likely to be sexually assaulted. Although, the current research focuses on workplace outcomes for women who are sexually harassed, it is important to note this relationship. While our results indicate that organizational climate is important for remediating the negative workplace outcomes for those who are sexually harassed, it is important to keep in mind that previous research has also demonstrated that having a lenient climate in terms of sexual harassment may also lead to sexual assault. This underscores the importance of having a zero-tolerance climate for sexual harassment.